

*Classical Music*  
A SPECIAL SECTION

HANT

*The Passion for Medieval Music May Open Doors to the Present*

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IT'S SOOTHING, calming, hypnotic. It ushers you into a different mood, melancholy yet hopeful. It's got a New Age atmosphere, but purer, more uplifting. Well, that's what my friends are telling me about Gregorian chant, and since I've asked Jews as well as Catholics, the response doesn't seem background-specific. Let me say straight off that I don't quite get the appeal, even though I've been an early-music buff for 20 years. The roulette wheel of mass enthusiasm has spun and come to rest on a repertory of a thousand or so unaccompanied melodies from the medieval era, bringing fame to obscure European monasteries and wealth to a few quick-witted record producers whose chant archives had been gathering dust for decades.

The Benedictine monks of Santo Domingo de Silos are the current stars because of their record-breaking Chant

BY KYLE GANN

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## Classical Music A SPECIAL SECTION

album (over 2.5 million U.S. sales so far), and they're also being trumpeted on other new compilations as though that freak success meant they were aurally distinguishable from any other monastery. Since *Chant* appeared, over 20 new releases with titles like *Chill to the Chant*, *Quietude*, and *The Best of the Benedictine Monks of St. Michaels* have followed, the top sellers recently nearing the 10,000 mark. And to show graphically how far civilization has fallen, Deutsche Grammophon, in my youth the most prestigious and dignified of record labels, has just ransacked its archives to release *Mad About the Monks*.

It's a '90s thing. We spent the '80s making scads of money (well, nobody I know did, but somebody must have), and now that our material needs either are met or aren't going to be met, we'll kick back, get humble, and access our deeper values by listening to the ancient theme songs of the world's largest antiabortion, anti-birth-control institution, the Catholic church.

Not that you'd learn from reading the liner notes to these discs, most of them hastily assembled from back catalogues of obscure chant recordings, that the church has anything to do with it. Prochoice liberals listen happily, but a frisson of indignation has shot through Catholic circles, among believers disgruntled that a music designed for the self-effacing discipline of monks is being clicked on as an effortless spiritual fix by hordes of trendy agnostics and worse. But how could the church complain? It maddened lots of musical Catholics by dropping its chant legacy at Vatican II, in favor of watery folk rock. What the church threw away, the record companies have turned into cash.

Since the chant craze is allergic to context, let's provide some. Most of the discs will admit that Gregorian chant is named after Pope Gregory I, who, in 599, apparently ordered his underlings to collect the music used in churches across Europe. Songs for different feast days and various parts of the church service—called antiphons,

that chant may have been sung originally in stricter, more metrical rhythm.

Ecclesiastical chant is the earliest lens through which we can look back beyond our Western heritage into the ancient past we share with Arabic, Hebrew, and Hindu cultures. The homogenized, flowing lines of even the most authentic modern performances, though, seem to obscure rather than reveal common linkages.

If you're looking for a bona fide chant experience, stay away from the discs with fake Magritte covers, more than one singing group represented, and liner notes of two pages or less; you can't be sure what you're getting. There are exceptions, however. *Quietude* (Teldec), with the choir of the Capella antiqua of Munich led by Konrad Ruhland, is a beautifully produced disc, and includes examples of the more rhythmic, metered performance style. For decades the classic and most reliable chant recordings of several Benedictine abbeys have appeared on the Archiv label, many of them now reissued on CD. Archiv's 1969 disc with the Santo Domingo de Silos monks, far better than *Chant*, is partly reproduced on DGG's *Mad About the Monks*, actually a respectable and good-humored compilation. Harmonia Mundi also has a fine chant series of long standing that dips into diverse repertoires.

accented beat. You can often tell early motets by the presence of multiple titles separated by hyphens or virgules, since they commonly use different texts in each voice.

I empathize with Catholic misgivings about these discs for musical reasons. Ambient listening is pleasant, but I enjoy chants most when I've made an emotional connection to particular ones via their connotations and wider cultural resonances. I love Marian antiphons such as "Alma redemptoris mater" and "Salve regina" partly because of their relation to other works devoted to the Virgin Mary, and

classic, romantic, and modernist eras was an unhealthy aberration from the norm. That's clearly not a viewpoint to endear one to the classical music establishment.

American artists, typically disenchanted with the religions they grew up in, tend to think Buddhist when they think spiritual, so that Lou Harrison's *La Koro Sutro* and Janice Giteck's *Om Shanti* reflect Balinese influences while Terry Riley's modal meditations are more Indian-oriented. A few Americans have turned their local religious ambience into art, such as Ben Johnston taking inspiration from



*Anonymous Four: The most promising releases of the early-music wave*

"Pange lingua" because it became the theme for a beautiful mass by Josquin Des Prez. I'm exactly the kind of listener the slap-'em-out Magritte-jacketed discs are not aimed at.

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Since the chant craze is allergic to context, let's provide some. Most of the discs will admit that Gregorian chant is named after Pope Gregory I, who, in 599, apparently ordered his underlings to collect the music used in churches across Europe. Songs for different feast days and various parts of the church service—called antiphons, responses, introits, alleluias, tracts, and so on—were regularized and suitably distributed throughout the year. (A ninth-century myth claims that Greg I wrote the songs himself, while some modern scholars doubt that he was involved at all.) Around 850, Pope Leo IV made adherence to the Gregorian canon compulsory on pain of excommunication, pushing other chant repertoires, such as the Ambrosian and Byzantine, into the background.

The glorious self-promoting claims of these discs notwithstanding, we don't know what the stuff sounded like. All we have are a bunch of neumes—square or squiggly marks representing from one to four notes each—on manuscripts dating back to the ninth century. The earliest notations can be wonderfully liquid, hinting at a highly inflected singing style something like Arabic chanting or Hebrew cantillation. A wealth of nuance may have been lost when the quill replaced the reed pen in the 13th century, making the notes square and more uniform. (My personal theory is that the technology of the quill pen fundamentally altered Europe's conception of the musical unit—the note—and sent European music down a path diametrically opposite to most other world musics.) It has become traditional, largely thanks to the Benedictine monks of Solesmes, to sing the notes in flowing tones of equal duration with occasional longer notes on cadences. That's the practice you'll hear on most discs. It's been speculated, however,

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To see how far you can get bilked by unscrupulous companies, get *Gregorian Chants: The Best of the Benedictine Monks of St. Michael's* (Laserlight), produced by alleged poet Rod McKuen. (Doubtless Erica Jong will counter with her own disc, *Fear of Chanting*.) This disc, which also contains performances by two other groups besides the St. Michael's monks, never acknowledges that not all of its music is chant. McKuen states in the liner notes that one of the choirs has "added discrete [sic] harmonies." Reprehensible as that would have been, it isn't true. Instead, several of the works are uncredited polyphonic motets and mass movements from the 15th century, including John Dunstable's gorgeous *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, which, as a longtime Dunstable fan, I recognized at once—not terribly well sung, I might add. This is charlatanism.

Another not-all-chant disc is RCA's *Chill to the Chant*, several of whose cuts are polyphonic medieval forms such as free organum and 13th-century motets. Nice music, sung by two expert groups—Sequentia and the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis—but not chant. How can you tell? Chant consists of a single, unaccompanied melody sung by one or many voices. Free organum (rare enough on record that its inclusion would have been welcome if credited) contains two or three mildly independent and often parallel contrapuntal lines, though still sung in free rhythm. And early motets usually have three or four polyphonic lines forming harmonies in a regularly



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Yet I can see the phenomenon in a number of positive lights. After all, *Chant* wasn't a marketing triumph so much as a grassroots movement that took the record companies by surprise. The turn toward spirituality in music looks both sincere and widespread, as evidenced by the East European composers that classical circles have recently made a fuss about: Henryk Górecki, Arvo Part, Sofia Gubaidulina, Giya Kancheli. Part's new *Te Deum* (ECM) shares chant's devotional qualities: slow, melancholy melodic lines, modal tonalities, churchly atmosphere. And Górecki's popular *Third Symphony* (Nonesuch) meanders up and down scales in a way explicitly suggestive of chant, if less enduring in interest.

So, spirituality is hip. That's great news, and it would have been even better news 20 years ago, when American composers like Terry Riley, Pauline Oliveros, La Monte Young, Harold Budd, Annea Lockwood, and others initiated the musical spirituality movement that Górecki, Part, et al., joined later. Many Downtown composers feel more kinship with medieval music than with the grandiose romantic works that classical audiences have long preferred. They often implicitly accept the argument that art has an essential, stabilizing role to play in human life, apparent in medieval and Third World cultures, while the violently emotional, elitist, and overly personal music of the European

Protestant hymnody in his string quartets and William Duckworth reworking rural shaped-note hymns for his choral cycle *Southern Harmony*. For reasons that seem fairly obvious, rarely does an American tap into a European tradition like chant to express mystical leanings. So while classical buffs champion the spiritual Slavs, the Americans can't get credit for having been profound first.

But even if yet another cultural movement is going to bypass American composers, at least the public sense of what can constitute spirituality is getting closer to home. For decades we've balanced the so-called mystic East against the rationalistic West. But now that we find Balinese and Japanese pop music in stores and on radio, and see more contemporary Asian art, maybe we no longer need to project spirituality onto a foreign part of the world and can accept the fact that a long mystic tradition runs through the culture we came from. Or, now that youths are no longer routinely exposed to the European tradition, perhaps we're becoming sufficiently distanced from it to rediscover it without connotations of snobbery or moral elevation. Maybe we can approach it again with a sense of discovery untainted by obligation, and begin to move up through its fantastic history with renewed pleasure. And if medieval music, well marketed, can teach the classical listener that music need not be full of emotional ebbs and swells and climaxes to be great and soulful, then it may open doors to the present.

For this reason, I'm less intrigued by the chant thing than by the spin-off discs that are drawing larger crowds to other

# CHANT, A GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT, TOOK THE INDUSTRY BY SURPRISE



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aspects of early music. The most deservedly popular releases in the wave are those by the vocal quartet Anonymous 4 (Harmonia Mundi). Their *An English Ladymass* (which has sold 82,000) mixes chant with motets, hymns, and polyphonic songs; the distinctions are carefully documented. And their latest disc, *Love's Illusion*, is a splendid journey through a voluminous and seminal 13th-century manuscript, the Montpellier Codex, full of delicately lovely early motets in the loping triple meter of 13th-century rhythm. I'm partial to these motets played with instrumental accompaniments in David Munrow's *Music of the Gothic Era* album (Archiv), but Anonymous 4 sing with such angelic purity that I may eventually be seduced away.

In other cases, early music's newfound pop aura is tempting some musicians into tasteless boundary-blurring. ECM's widely trumpeted new *Officium* album, a selection of works by Cristóbal de Morales, Guillaume Dufay, Perotin, and anonymous composers, overlays the beautiful singing of the Hilliard Ensemble with the saxophone improvisations of Jan Garbarek. The saxophone (admittedly tasteful, given the circumstances) fills in for you the subjective response you might have had to the music if you had seriously listened to it. Garbarek, in the misbegotten vision of ECM head Manfred Eicher, has saved you the trouble. How can anyone listen to this disc, whose arbitrary alterations the long-dead composers are powerless to prevent, without thinking of the colorization of classic black-and-white films? This sentimentalized predigestion of medieval music brilliantly fits the zeitgeist of chant mania and suggests new, ever more nauseating directions.

The feelings others get from chant, I get from the music that followed chant, the great masses and motets of the 15th and 16th centuries by composers such as Dufay, Johannes Ockeghem, and Josquin; to a modest extent that music is getting a ride on chant's coat-tails. Just as medieval scholars wrote by the accretion of commentaries in the margins of works by earlier authorities, medieval composers based their music on music that had

inner light. (My favorite recording is by the Cappella Nova directed by Richard Taruskin, on *Gaudeamus*.) An underrated Renaissance great is Heinrich Isaac, whose career benefitted at the time because he was easier to get along with than the egotistical Josquin. By the time you get to Palestrina, who symbolized the twilight of the Renaissance, you're almost in the common practice period, and recordings become easier to choose.

You want spiritual? You want inner tranquility? The Renaissance masters will pour it over you in bucketfuls. If I'da known that was hip, I'd have suggested it earlier. ♦

CrossOver  
DREAMS

The Market  
Discovers New Music.  
The Result  
Is Heretical, But Is



TIM SIMMONS

*Balanescu Quartet: Fusive fantasies with Kraftwerk*

Consider composer Raymond Scott's description of the eclectic Kronos Quartet, new music's archetypal ensemble, as "a classically trained, jazz-based, pop visionary." Scott's point illustrates the prismatic nature of this genre. It encompasses "exotic" composers like the Mexican modernist Silvestre Revueltas, film-score alumni like Michael Nyman, and fusive fantasies such as Balanescu Quartet's work with the synth band Kraftwerk, Brodsky Quartet's accompaniment of Elvis Costello, or Michael Torke's layering of Madonna.

In its eager pursuit of popularity, this new music represents a dramatic shift from the modernist tradition, with its contempt for the mass audience. The difference shows in the profit margin. Where sales of 5000 are respectable for a new classical release, some new-music recordings have approached megahit status. Górecki's *Third Symphony*, often hailed as the work that opened the door for new music, has sold over half a million copies since its release in 1992. *Pieces of Africa*, the Kronos Quartet's venture into Afro rhythms and structures, sold over 200,000 copies. Even more extraordinary is its crossover audience: *Pieces of Africa* was number one on the classical and world-music charts simultaneously.

Kronos's genre straddling raises questions

two guitars, and drums support the more conventional french horn and violin. Danceworks even has the requisite rock advisory: "This recording should be played at HIGH VOLUME!"

Then there's the Kronos Quartet. Their latest release, *Night Prayers* (Nonesuch), puts the 21-year-old ensemble in yet another new musical realm, this time adapting the sonorous spirituality of Sofia Gubaidulina and other composers from the former Soviet bloc.

The most "market-savvy" (to use Page's term) of any string quartet, Kronos embodies the essential relationship between new music and marketing.

Page expresses an admirable wish that the Catalyst catalogue "is not something I'll be ashamed of in 2004." But will anybody, in 10 years, be at all interested in David Byrne's string quartets? Or Paul McCartney's *Liverpool Oratorio*? Can the vast variety of new music be constructively contained?

Labels have found that this new music falls between two established categories: Crossover and the avant-garde. Hyper-ventilated versions of Broadway show tunes, Frank Zappa's stab at Varèse, even Walter Murphy's "A Fifth of Beethoven" from *Saturday Night Fever*: All are notorious examples of what has happened in the past when classical music met the marketplace. But what about the obverse? From John Cage aleatory anti-performances, to Pierre Boulez's serialism, the avant-garde rejected the audience so soundly that Cage's *4'33"*—in which the performer sits at the piano, poised to play, for four minutes and 33 seconds before closing the lid and walking away—is the infamous result. Such experimental compositions make

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Like new music, this repertoire can all sound alike at first, and some of it even bizarre; so I'd like to provide some quick guidelines for where to proceed beyond chant. The four-voice (and non-free) organum by Perotin, chief musician at Notre Dame Cathedral in the 12th century, will give you the same austere luminosity as chant (especially as sung by the Hilliard Ensemble on ECM), exponentially magnified in hypnotic textures that have inspired much American minimalism. Martin Luther started Josquin's reputation as the Beethoven of the Renaissance by saying that "Josquin is master of the notes; others are mastered by them"; and there is something Beethovenian about the lucidity of Josquin's logic and the audacity of his contrapuntal tours de force. If we link Josquin to Beethoven, then experimental Dufay is the era's Haydn, with his clarity of phrasing and establishment of conventions that others will later follow.

But Johannes Ockeghem, who was contemporaneous with Dufay and taught Josquin, hardly corresponds to Mozart. My favorite Renaissance figure, he wrote masses and motets deeper in pitch, more seamlessly overlapping in polyphony, more murky, long-lined, and mystical than any of the others. For me the most heavenly masterpiece of the 15th century is Ockeghem's *Missa Prolationem*, an incredible contrapuntal feat of complex canons whose overlapping harmonies glow with an



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It Historical?  
BY THOMAS GOETZ

IT'S NOT EASY TO DEFINE contemporary classical music—or even to know where to look for it. I know this from experience, having attempted to locate a disc called *Galax*, featuring baroque variations on the Beatles song "She's So Heavy." "The thing is," said a clerk at Tower Records who'd come to my aid, "some of these new discs could go almost anywhere." From Philip Glass's gloss on David Bowie to the Meridian Arts Ensemble's sampling of Jimi Hendrix and mambo jazz, this new music—with its inspired (sometimes insipid) mix of influences and instrumentation—is a playful departure from the standard rep.

"I see the classical market as traditionally working in two different ways," says Tim Page, executive producer of BMG's new-music label, Catalyst. "One way is to do the same old stuff, 'It's been two years since we did a Brahms *Third*, let's put out another.' The other way is to have Plácido Domingo sing Spinal Tap, that sort of crossover stuff. I want Catalyst to go a new way, releasing intellectual music that will also have the possibility of a wide audience."

But how to define this new music? As Carol Yaple, senior director of artist development at Elektra/Nonesuch, warned, "By the time you pigeonhole it, it's probably over." Page could only say what he wanted new music not to be: "I don't want to do classical light. I don't want there to be a Catalyst sound, like there's a Windham Hill sound." Page added, "That's the kiss of death."

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Kronos's genre straddling raises questions about other, similar musical efforts. Are violist da gamba Roy Whelden's variations on "She's So Heavy" too arcane? Is *Ritual*, the new release by Le Mystere Des Voix Bulgares, a folk recording or a classical one? And what about New Age, that musical interstice where Alan Hovhaness meets Clannad? Perhaps these begging questions answer themselves: What's new music? Whatever the market will bear.

The most telling evidence of that is the increasing willingness of record labels to enter this market. Once known for its jazz recordings, the German label ECM has expanded its catalogue to offer the genre-bending recordings of Keith Jarrett and Arvo Pärt. Argo, a British label resurrected in 1990 by Polygram, has released over 50 recordings of contemporary music by composers such as Nyman, Torke, and Paul Schoenfield (whose repertoire includes a 22-minute cacophony called *Klezmer Rondos*). Polygram has also launched the Point label, run by composer Philip Glass. Elektra has Nonesuch and Mute.

In 1993, the German label BMG launched Catalyst expressly for new music. Its newest releases include Steve Martland's efforts with a chamber group that incorporates electric guitar and bass, and *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel*, in which percussionist Evelyn Glennie punctuates the anthems of Scottish composer James MacMillan. Every musical tradition is open to reference, and any combination—a baroque fugue and a backcountry lyric, a saxophone line imposed on medieval chant—may come into play.

Consider *Danceworks*, performed by the Steve Martland Band. Though based on a classical structure, it has the tempo and instrumentation of a rock album: three saxophones,

many string quartets, and all notorious examples of what has happened in the past when classical music met the marketplace. But what about the obverse? From John Cage aleatory anti-performances, to Pierre Boulez's serialism, the avant-garde rejected the audience so soundly that Cage's 4'33"—in which the performer sits at the piano, poised to play, for four minutes and 33 seconds before closing the lid and walking away—is the infamous result. Such experimental compositions make for better reading than listening.

Tim Page describes Catalyst's place as somewhere between these poles. "We're not out there on the cutting edge, not totally avant-garde. I'm not going to have BMG put \$100,000 into a Gunther Schuller tuba concerto that'll sell five copies—four to the Schuller family. But I think it's very important and possible to do records that are both intellectually interesting and interesting to the ear."

For classical labels, the prospects of a new market couldn't be more timely. "The major labels had a five-to seven-year honeymoon with CDs," explains Carl Pritzkat, marketing director for BMG Classics and ECM. At that time, the classical audience was eagerly replacing its vinyl holdings with CDs of the same. "But now," says Pritzkat, "everybody already owns their 16 copies of Beethoven's *Fifth*. The public is bored with traditional choices, and they want something new."

The largest share of the classical market remains budget and midprice recordings of old reliables. But new music represents one of the fastest growing niches. This growth comes despite the uncertainties inherent in promoting new music. "We've learned that you can over-hype this," says Lynn Hoffman-Engel, senior vice-president of marketing and sales at Polygram. "It is a challenge when you're marketing Pavarotti at the same time as someone new and unknown."

The risk of a big-budget marketing strategy, no matter how delicately applied, is that the music itself becomes secondary. "The idea that marketing in itself can create an audience for a new artist or sound is extremely naive," Page says. "I see a lot of money being spent on really bad music."

The trick is for a record label to pursue a